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Discourses about austerity among British political elites, 2003-2013

"The age of austerity demands responsible politics. Over the next few years, we will have to take some incredibly tough decisions on taxation, spending, borrowing - things that really affect people's lives."

David Cameron, 2009.

Austerity in UK politics

Since the banking crisis of 2008, discussion about austerity has become one of the central themes of British political debate. Broadly speaking, adherents to austerity policies argue that government spending is too high to be sustainable, and levels of government debt are acting as a brake on economic growth (Reinhart and Rogoff, 2010). Opponents of this economic theory argue that governments need to spend their way out of recession as a method to stimulate recovery (Krugman, 2012).

However, this binary characterisation downplays the complexity of austerity, which has a long history of being politically, philosophically and economically contentious (Blyth, 2013). This poster describes a research project that aims to examine exactly how austerity has been discussed and understood by think tanks, an important element of the UK's political elite, between 2003 and 2013.

In particular, it seeks to address three research questions:

- **RQ1:** Is there increased discussion of austerity in British politics in recent years? How does the scale of this discussion differ across the political left and political right, and how does it compare to the levels of discussion prior to the financial crisis?
- **RQ2:** Is there a thematic difference between the political-left and political-right in their discussion of austerity?
- **RQ3:** Are there substantive areas of disagreement / difference within political factions? (i.e. do individual think tanks on the left and right offer distinctive themes, relative to other elements of their political faction?).

Why study think tanks?

Think tanks, otherwise known as independent policy research institutes (Stone, 1996b), are an important part of the UK political scene. There are a number of reasons why they are a useful case study for understanding elite political debate around specific issues:

- While they rarely undertake research in the academic sense of the word, think tanks draw on the latest thinking from academia and reproduce it in a format accessible to policy makers. Through these processes, they have the ability to publicise larger debates and catch the intellectual zeitgeist.
- In terms of personnel, there is a significant cross over between think tanks and elected politicians. A number of high profile British political figures in both the last Labour government and the current Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition administration had worked in the think tank sector.
- More broadly, think tanks have the ability to frame policy problems and the language that is used to describe them. As such they are important actors in forming discourse coalitions around specific debates and issues (Stone, 1996a).

Data and methods

This study draws on a large dataset constructed by the author containing 1800 pamphlets published by 10 leading UK think tanks between 2003 – 2013. The think tanks sampled were (with number of publications in parenthesis):

- Right-leaning think tanks: The Bow Group (54), the Centre for Policy Studies (226),the Centre for Social Justice (100), Institute of Economic Affairs (185) and Policy Exchange (286).
- Left-leaning think tanks: Compass (59), Demos (294), the Fabians (81), the Institute of Public Policy Research (536) and Progress (22).

The next step was to extract all paragraphs of these texts using the word austerity. This gave a sample of 650 paragraphs, containing 63,210 words. These were then subjected to various computer aided text analysis techniques.

Bibliography

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- Stone, D. (1996a). Capturing the political imagination : think tanks and the policy process. London, Cass.
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RQ1: The scale of debate

Figure 1 shows the number of mentions of the word austerity per 100,000 words in publications produced by left-leaning and right-leaning think tanks.

Figure 1: Mentions of the word austerity in left-leaning and right-leaning think tank publications per year, 2003 - 2013

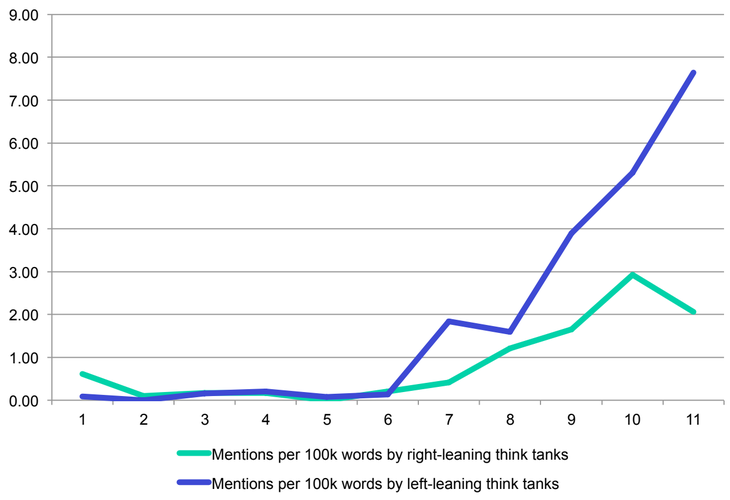


Figure 1 points to three conclusions:

- First, and most obviously, references to austerity have increased dramatically in the period following the financial crisis.
- However, references to austerity are not evenly distributed across the political spectrum. In the post-financial crisis period, it is think tanks on the left that are most likely to talk about austerity.
- That said, discussion about austerity is not completely new. There are references to the concept prior to the financial crisis.

This last conclusion can be further examined by looking at the actual texts themselves. One thing that this examination makes clear is that pre-financial crisis discussion of austerity does not always use the same definition as dominates contemporary debate. Instead, austerity is frequently associated with the 1945–1951 Labour governments. Despite having to govern within the financial restrictions imposed by the post-war economy, this was also the government that greatly increased the reach of the welfare state, including creating the NHS.

RQ2: Right vs. Left

Figure 2 shows the words that are used disproportionately by right- and left-leaning think tanks in the same paragraphs as references to austerity.

Figure 2: Most distinctive words used by right-leaning and left-leaning think tanks, 2009 – 2013

Word ranking	Right-leaning think tanks	Left-leaning think tanks
1	German	labour
2	Police	per_cent
3	Stability	House
4	Germany	investment
5	package	party
6	Greece	change
7	European	business
8	debt	consider
9	once_again	Social
10	patient	alternative

The differences between the right- and left-leaning think tanks language use are noticeable from this analysis, and allow us to infer a few conclusions:

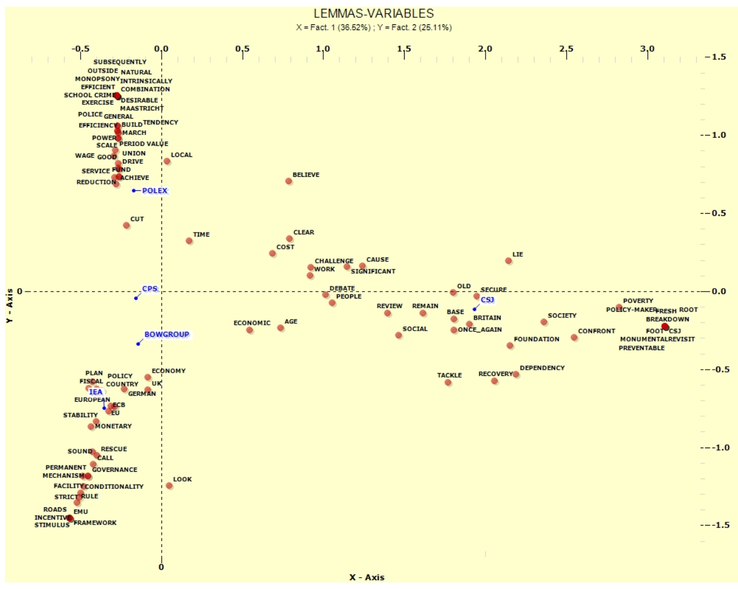
- Right-leaning think tanks seem to be more focused on international and European politics (evident through the disproportionate use of of words such as **German, Germany, Greece** and **European**). Additionally, they seem pre-occupied with the dangers of **debt**. Perhaps most interestingly though, there seems to be a concern about the social consequences of austerity with references to the **police** and **stability**. This may reflect the re-emergence of a traditional conservative concern with the stability of the state in the face of crisis.
- In contrast, the left is more focused on the political consequences of austerity (**Labour** and **party**). This is perhaps because Labour have been in opposition for most of this period, rather than in government. They also seem to be clearly arguing for a different course of action in response to the financial crisis (**investment, consider** and **alternative**).

RQ3: Debates within political factions

In order to address this research question a technique called correspondence analysis is used. Correspondence analysis is able to graphically show the relationship between the appearance of different words and variables by arranging them along multiple axis. In short, words and variables appearing in close proximity to each other have a stronger tendency to appear together in the dataset, in contrast to those that appear further apart from each other (for a further discussion of this method, see Clausen, 1998).

Right-leaning think tanks

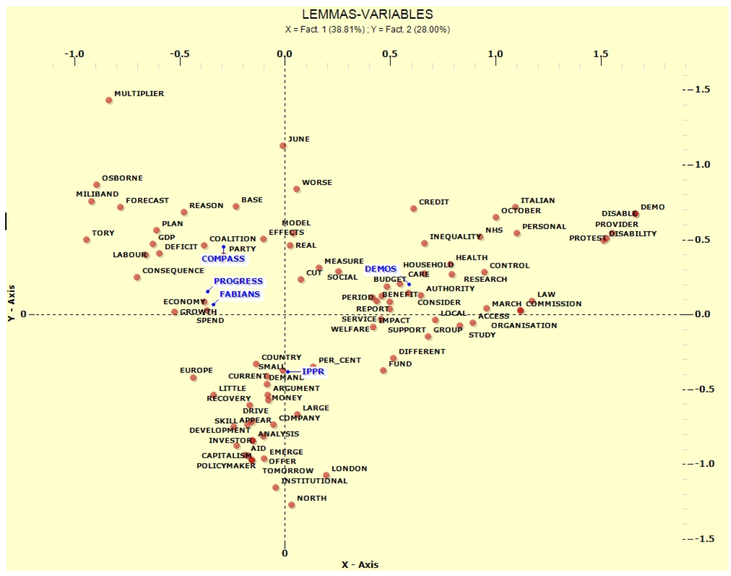
Figure 3: Correspondence analysis of paragraphs featuring the word austerity published by right-leaning think tanks, 2003 - 2013



•The horizontal axis of the right-leaning correspondence analysis demonstrates clearly how distinctive the output of the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) is, as it is far removed from any other right-leaning think tank. Founded in 2004 by former Conservative leader Iain Duncan-Smith, the CSJ looked to bring social issues to the forefront of the party's agenda. The language associated with the CSJ in the correspondence analysis certainly reflects these interests (**breakdown, dependency, poverty, society** and **work** for example). Additionally though the activist orientation of the CSJ is clear, with a particularly strong use of words indicating proactivity in dealing with the social challenges identified (**challenge, confront, preventable** and **tackle**).
•The arrangement on the vertical axis is less clear-cut although there is a distinction between institutions and words focused on the science of economics (in the bottom left quadrant of the graph) and those more interested in the policy impact of austerity in other areas (in the top left quadrant). The former group is maybe indicative of a more fundamental commitment to free-market conservatism.

Left-leaning think tanks

Figure 4: Correspondence analysis of paragraphs featuring the word austerity published by left-leaning think tanks, 2003 - 2013



•Broadly speaking the left-leaning correspondence analysis seems to show less obvious relationships than the right-leaning equivalent.
•However, the horizontal axis does seem to show a difference between think tanks more focused on politics (Compass, the Fabians and Progress, which are associated with words such as: **coalition, Labour, Miliband**, **party** and **Tory**) as opposed to Demos, which is more closely associated with social issues.
•On the vertical axis, the Institute of Public Policy Research's (IPPR) output is distinctive and seems to use a far more technocratic language than do other think tanks in the sample.

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